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ABSTRACT

Descriptions of various types of prison postsecondary education programs include both those inside the institution and on a precommitment or post-release basis. Concerns common to these programs include costs, geographic isolation of institutions, post-release linkages, transferability of earned credits, scheduling educational participation, physical facilities, and the availability of books and educational resources. (MJM)

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College Programs for Prisoners - Some Critical Issues *

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From time to time newspapers print an eye catching story about some "hardened criminal" who has just earned a college degree while locked up in a penitentiary. Similarly, a magazine will run a titilating story "Rape, Plunder and Pillage Your Way Through College", implying, obliquely but deliberately, that if your children are having difficulties getting into college, or, if by any chance, you can't afford their tuition costs, have them break a law, get sent to prison, and they will be on their way to free college educations. These stories, by design or accident, leave the impression that just about everyone in prison is going to college.

The truth is considerably less spectacular The daily prison population in the United States is estimated at approximately 400,000. Of these, around 150,000 are "detained" in local and county jails or are serving sentences of such duration that they cannot readily be involved in traditional education programs. A relatively small number, around 23,000, are in federal institutions. The remaining 227,000 are in state prisons

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There are no precise figures of the number of prisoners in the United States currently involved in postsecondary education programs but we estimate that the number ranges somewhere between 1% and 5%, or roughly between a low of 2,500 and a possible high of 12,500. Dell'Apa (1973) found the figure to be less than 6% (around 6,400 out of 109,161 prisoners), based on a 60% (150 institutions) response to questionnaires sent to 249 adult correctional institutions.

In the federal system we know that in 1974 there were approximately 4,000 enrollments in college level courses including 550 enrollments of prisoners taking courses in campus based classes. If we assume an average enrollment of 2 courses per student, approximately 2,000 federal prisoners were enrolled in postsecondary programs during 1974. The proportion of state prisoners involved in postsecondary programs is probably somewhat lower than that in the federal system, with the possible exception of a few individual states.

We don't know how many students receive Associate or Bachelor of Arts degrees annually, while still incarcerated, but we place the figure

nationally, at somewhere between 100 and 300 students.

We can, therefore, reasonably conclude that the prison route to a college degree is precarious.

Access to Services - The Major Challenge

It is difficult to assess how many prisoners could reasonably be expected to become involved in postsecondary education during imprisonment. Taggart (1972) "liberally estimated that there are 30,000 inmates in prisons and jails who could benefit ..." from access to higher education opportunities. I think it's safe to conjecture that doubling the number of those currently involved would strain neither the student potential nor the available education resources. Establishing access to these resources poses the greatest immediate problem and challenge. I'd like to confront this access issue and discuss some possible solutions.

Pre-Commitment Diversion

If you share my biases you will agree that the best criminal justice system is one designed to keep people out of prison and uses confinement only as an action of last resort. You will also agree that postsecondary education institutions can contribute to this design by helping to divert first offenders from imprisonment.

The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) in cooperation with the United States Office of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), is involved in an experimental/demonstration project (Offender Assistance Through Community Colleges) which incorporates, in part, the kinds of activities which can be generated by postsecondary education institutions, at the community level, to help keep first offenders out of prison.

The idea, conceived many years ago by then AACJC Vice President, R. Frank Mensel is now being implemented under the creative and committed leadership of Project Director, James P. Mahoney. A number of community and junior colleges were invited to submit proposals to describe how they and their corresponding criminal justice systems would provide a continuum of services to first felony offenders to divert them from imprisonment. Three communities, Jacksonville, Florida, Charlotte, North Carolina and Denver, Colorado have been selected as demonstration sites. It is not anticipated that all first offender referrals to the program will become college students. Some may; others may be provided

occupational counseling and job development and/or placement services. Still others may be referred to family counseling, mental health or other community services centers. The basic purpose of this First Offender Diversion Project is to provide courts and probation services with one additional alternative to imprisonment, and its destructive and debilitating impact on the offender.

Diversion programs are certainly not new. Nimmer (1974) and the American Bar Association Commission on Facilities and Correctional Services have provided significant conceptual and descriptive publications about such programs. What may be new about this AACJC-FIPSE project is the anticipated pre-commitment intervention role of education institutions - offering access to their resources to a larger and, in some cases, a new clientele. In addition, it is hoped that the Offender Assistance Project will demonstrate how community and junior colleges can assist in establishing appropriate linkages between first offenders and other community based resources; a new role perhaps for many community and junior colleges.

"Inside" College Programs

A college course offered inside a prison is probably the oldest kind of postsecondary correctional education program. Some of these courses were available as early as 1939 and predate even the first prison college survey. Adams (1968) found that more than 50% of existing prison systems offered some form of college program. Approximately 3,000, or slightly more than one percent of state and federal prisoners were involved in these programs; all, or practically all of them "inside" the prisons.

Three years later another survey by Adams and Connolly (1971) estimated that 150 colleges or universities and 121 junior colleges were involved in inmate education. In 1973 the Newgate Resource Center reported that of 305 individual penal institutions surveyed, 218 (71%) reported that they offered postsecondary courses. No distinction was made between "inside" or campus based courses, but we know from first hand experience that most continued to be offered inside the prisons.

Recent new developments within the higher education community have accelerated the rate of increase in the number of prisoner/students involved in "inside" college courses.

The University Without Walls, including demonstration programs funded by the U. S. Office of Education, Teacher Corps, have contributed to this increased access to "inside" college programs. Portions of these programs take place outside the prison, but they are primarily contained within the correctional institution.

Higher education efforts such as the Oklahoma televised instruction system, college-at-home-programs and others which combine flexible, individualized scheduling and modern technology offer additional opportunities to extend "inside" prison college programs.

"Outside" College Programs - Study-Release

The logistics of providing prisoner access to college classes outside the prison are more complicated. Despite substantial success with such study-release programs their rate of growth continues to be very slow. Upward Bound/Newgate efforts which initially began in Oregon, Kentucky, Minnesota, New Mexico and Pennsylvania combined both "inside" and "outside" courses of study, arranged so that the "outside" portion coincided with the approach of the student's release date. As the initial fundings of these programs by the Office of Economic Opportunity were absorbed by the correctional systems themselves, the outside portions of the programs diminished in

duration and importance. However, these programs continue to function, funded completely by correctional institution budgets and/or Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and/or special U. S. Office of Education Program funds.

A limited number of postsecondary occupational training programs also combine "inside" and "outside" classes. In some few cases nearby area vocational technical schools and community colleges provide all the instruction on an "outside" basis. Prisoner/students sometimes participate in the same classes as regular students; in other cases the prisoners comprise a separate class. Prisoner/student classes take place both during daytime and evening hours depending on scheduling problems and community and correctional institution understanding and flexibility.

In limited number of instances prisoner/students live on campus either in a separate supervised half-way house arrangement or in regular student housing.

Access to study release or "outside" college programs, even where prisoners are serving their sentences under minimum security conditions in correctional institutions literally surrounded by technical/professional schools, community and junior college and four-year colleges and universities, continues to be minimal and presents a challenging

area for priority attention and growth.

Post Release College Programs

An underlying agenda of all prison education efforts is the development of the students' continuing interest in education both as a means of staying out of prison and of enriching their personal lives. Most people who work with prisoners can cite impressive anecdotes about an individual's continuation of postsecondary studies after release from prison but, except for isolated follow-up studies, we lack significant data regarding what portion of prisoner-college-students continue to attend college after release and actually receive either an AA or BA degree or a postsecondary technical or professional school certification.

Marshall Kaplan, Gans and Kahn's (1972) follow-up study of Newgate students reported a wide variety of problems, conceptual as well as practical, inherent in post-release education linkages. Continued identification as an offender, lack of emotional as well as financial support systems, overly intensive parole supervision, time gaps between release and college enrollment are but a few of the problems which require attention if post-release college programs are to be used effectively.

Areas of Concern Common to All Prison College Programs

Several areas of concern cut across all prison postsecondary education programs whether they take place inside or outside the institution or on a pre-commitment or post-release basis.

Costs

Prisons which have education programs generally provide them at no cost to the prisoner up through the high school level. Postsecondary courses, where offered, frequently must be paid for completely, or in part, by the prisoner/student. Practices vary by state ranging from full payment by the student to full payment by the correctional institution. In the federal system, where budget resources permit and the course of study is an established program goal, all costs are paid by the correctional institution. In some cases the federal correctional institutuion will pay only up to 1/2 the costs involved and the individual student must pay the remainder. In other cases all costs must be borne by the student. The institution's budget, the course the student wants, the student's personal financial situation and similar factors contribute to the decision making process.

An additional cost problem grows out of the application of out-of-state fee schedules to prisoners who are not "residents" of the state in which they are incarcerated. The situation is particularly aggravated in federal correctional institutions which tend to serve as regional facilities housing prisoners from many states. A recent informal survey by Dr. Donald A. Deppe, Education Director of the Bureau of Prisons, of states in which federal prisons operate revealed that sixteen states charge in-state resident fees for federal prisoner/students and six charge the higher non-resident fees. State and county prisons are faced with a maze of in-county, out-of-county and related fee schedules.

Some colleges have been willing to charge a flat fee ranging roughly from $300.00 to $750.00 per "inside" course and the prison may have as many students in the class as is feasible - generally from 20 to 50. Where instructors travel significant distances mileage fees are an additional cost.

Since most prisoners have limited or no funds and their families are similarly situated, costs become a critical issue in providing access to higher education on any basis to the offender population.

Many prisons still lack sufficient funds to offer adequate literacy, elementary, high school or vocational training programs. Postsecondary education seems a long way down the road in such states.

Despite all this, the picture is by no means dismal. Some postsecondary education institutions are sensitive to cost problems and provide quality education at reasonable prices. Many dedicated instructors travel considerable distances, to and from isolated institutions, to teach one or two hours, sometimes after completing a full teaching schedule elsewhere. In many situations the readiness of the education establishment to provide services more than equals the readiness of the correctional community to use them.

Financial assistance available from non-prison sources has also helped meet cost problems. Prisoner/students are generally eligible to apply for education assistance on the same basis as other students.

Veteran's Education Benefits, Basic Education Opportunity Grants (BEOG), federally insured student loans as well as private group scholarships and grants are increasingly available to prisoner/students. In

one federal penitentiary I recently visited, 27 of the 87 students enrolled in college level courses were receiving BEOG grants and 33 were receiving Veteran's Education Benefits.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Administration has been another source of financial assistance where the individual student meets the requirements of the vocational rehabilitation program.

These education assistance funds are generally available both on an "inside" and "outside" basis.

Geographic Isolation of Institutions

Another critical access problem arises from the relative geographic isolation of some correctional institutions. Despite recent trends to locate new correctional facilities either in or near urban centers, as well as the urbanization of once isolated rural areas, some correctional institutions are still isolated from much needed resources. In such cases correspondence courses and various audio-visual alternatives are available. But as we all know, despite the best intentions, initial high student motivation levels are not sustained and correspondence course dropout rates continue to be high, both in and out of prison.

Closed circuit television and other audio-visual systems also bring college courses to places which would otherwise be unable to offer any postsecondary programs. However, these efforts are not widespread and operate primarily under experimental/demonstration conditions.

In addition to the problem of costs and geographic isolation five additional areas of concern are noteworthy.

Post-Release Linkages

We need to discover ways of strengthening post-release linkages between the student and a particular postsecondary institution. Ideally, this should involve establishing contact with college admissions staff before the prisoner/student's release, including specific procedural steps to insure the enrollment of the student before or very shortly after returning to the community in which the receiving education institution is located. There is considerable research evidence to suggest that the first three months after release from prison are critical. In addition, there is a direct correlation between the age of released prisoners and the liklihood that they will get into further difficulties. These factors, among others, suggest

that early post-release linkages into structured education situations are essential components of prison education efforts.

Transferability of Earned "Credits"

Many prisoners transfer from one institution to another in the same state while serving their sentence, and among states in the nationwide federal system. The issue of the transferability of credits is therefore, very important. The College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) and other arrangements provide strong foundations on which to build the general transferability of earned college credits. However, the transferability of credits between education institutions remains a stumbling block in efforts to maintain education involvement of the offender/student population, particularly if the student's transfer takes place before a specific course is completed.

Those states which have established separate school districts to provide kindergarten through grade 12 education in prisons may want to give some thought to the possibility of extending the school district's responsibility to include postsecondary education. This step alone would

not solve all the problems, but at least a structure would exist to facilitate addressing some of the credit transfer issues.

"Prime Time" for Education

Educators also have to join with correctional administrators to discover ways to schedule education participation by prisoners during daylight hours instead of relegating prison education programs to the evening hours. Education, as a program tool, must be regarded as a reasonable competitor with prison industries, institutional maintenance, group therapy and other demands on available institution program time.

Physical Facilities

Housing and study space for the prisoner/student continues to be a problem. A minimum of space and privacy to facilitate studying and the accomplishment of education assignments can be a critical variable which affects the student's continuation in a program. Since most prisoners are housed in institutions designed for containment and/or punishment rather than programs, it takes a great deal of imagination and good will to provide positive learning environments.

Books, Books, Books and a Little Technology

Libraries and the availability of books are similarly important. Some correctional institutions have met these problems creatively by using county or other public mobile library units, inter-library loan arrangements or by providing time for library work during study-release hours. Special groups such as the Association of American Publishers, Inc., and the American Booksellers Association have donated reference and other books to prisons but as LeDonne (1974) reports in her exhaustive study of prison libraries the library situation in prisons remains marginal.

The use of tape recorders and typewriters is still viewed with suspicion by the staff of many correctional institutions. Members of the education community can make an important contribution in working with such institutions, first, to develop an understanding of the need to use these machines in the education process and secondly, to assist in supervising the appropriate use of such machines by the students.

Conclusion

As you can see none of us concerned with providing greater access to postsecondary education

opportunities in prisons need worry about running out of challenges in the near future.

Access to education opportunities for prisoners will, in many respects, parallel the rate of growth in access to these opportunities by students in the free world. Our major goal therefore, must be to continue to enlarge postsecondary education opportunities for all potential students. There is every reason to believe that the continued growth of such opportunities generally will result in corresponding increases for prisoner/students.

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